

To Build a Better Way to Talk to Elected Officials, Startup Turns to Crowdfunding

Ben Miller | August 31, 2017



A pair of brothers, still undergraduate students at Stanford University, are not waiting to graduate to start up a gov tech company.

The duo, Liam and Aidan McCarty, have set their sights on a civic engagement platform meant to help constituents communicate with elected officials more easily, and for elected officials to keep better tabs on how their constituents feel. Their startup, ePluribus, is preparing for its first non-grant fundraising, turning to crowdfunding site Indiegogo before venture capitalists or angel investors. They plan to start the campaign Sept. 12.

The idea, in a nutshell, is that constituents will be able to send messages categorized by issue and separated into different types to their representatives via widget, website or social media. Then the elected officials could analyze the data. Eventually, the McCarty brothers hope to make ePluribus a two-way street where officials could also ask questions directly to their constituents.

Up until now, the brothers have been working on the basics: design, user research, early development. Neither come from a coding-heavy background — Liam is a physics

major, Aidan studies biochemistry — but both have worked in startup accelerators and they also have experience with venture capital work. This summer they traveled to Washington, D.C., to meet with 15 congressional offices and learn about how they interact with constituents.

What they found was some nuance inside an issue that became well-documented in the months following the election. Civic activism [increased notably](#) after Donald Trump's upset win in November, and particular issues such as a travel ban on people from selected Middle Eastern countries and health-care reform have prompted massive amounts of constituent feedback to legislative offices.

"There were a lot of people who felt like they didn't have a voice in politics," said Aidan McCarty.

The problem is that those legislative offices often don't have great ways of dealing with that feedback. They work off older systems and rely on easy-to-fake forms of identity verification like asking users to enter their zip code.

"Advocacy groups know that there's no way of them knowing who's who, so they basically flood them with messages and drown out the constituents," said Liam McCarty.

That's why they see identity verification as one of the most important pieces of their product pitch. Similarly to when a person answers questions at an ATM or over the phone that an imposter would have a hard time answering, the ePluribus concept will rely on people proving themselves before they can use the system. They'd then be able to decide how much of their information — if any — is shared with the representative they're contacting.

That way, elected officials and their offices can have a better sense of whether the people contacting them live in the jurisdiction they represent and who they are. But even if the message is anonymous, at least they know the person is a real person because they were verified when they signed up for ePluribus.

Though anonymity is an option, the company will encourage users to tell officials who they are.

"By providing that information, you give them that assurance that you are who you say you are, which gives you more impact," Liam McCarty said.

The idea is for the product to lean on integration. The company's first product, which they hope to officially launch in a couple months, will be built on top of social media platforms. A Twitter user could, while writing a tweet, select a representative — or multiple representatives — from a drop-down list and specifically target their message toward that person. Should the representative decide to buy into ePluribus, they would be able to aggregate ePluribus messages from various sources into a single place and analyze it. That feature would integrate with the office's existing content management system.

"A staffer in an office has to sit there tabulating, 'OK this many people seem to be against it, this many people seem to be for it,'" said Aidan McCarty. "We're trying to automate a lot of that."

The team has set its sights on another component to the business model as well: selling aggregated and anonymized information to the media. That would function as an accountability component, they said. If a politician receives a flood of messages against a bill from his or her constituents and votes for it anyway, the media could report that the politician ignored the pushback.

There are plenty of tech companies working on helping government better engage with constituents, but most are not involved directly with elected officials. [WiredBlue](#) and [SPIDR Tech](#) both build public engagement tools for law enforcement, for example, while companies like [PlaceSpeak](#), [Cityzen](#) and [Nextdoor](#) tend more toward [general local government engagement](#).

Other projects, like [Call to Action](#) and [PhoneCongress.com](#), help people get in touch with their representatives, but rely on existing tech tools and systems to do so.

The pair anticipate market demand for their product based on their conversations with congressional offices, as well as lower-level elected officials. They hope to first push in California and their home state of Wisconsin before expanding.

"We got a lot of excitement from those [congressional] offices," Aidan McCarty said, "and two of them explicitly said they'd be interested in piloting it."

<http://www.govtech.com/biz/To-Build-a-Better-Way-to-Talk-to-Elected-Officials-Startup-Turns-to-Crowdfunding.html>